

INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Christopher Cheng

Christopher Cheng is a former school teacher with a Master of Arts in Children's Literature. He has published award-winning children's nonfiction and fiction, including picture books and historical novels. For four years he was the children's book specialist for an Australian national book retailer of more than 100 stores. His duties included liaising with publishers, advising stores, and preparing book information briefs on classic and current children's and young adult titles. In 2006 he became a national "champion" for the Australian government's Literacy and Numeracy Week campaign, preparing information on books and reading strategies, attending literacy functions, speaking at conferences, and serving on the steering committee for the current Read Aloud conference. Chris has been a member of the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA), NSW branch, for over 20 years, and served on the 2006 biennial CBC conference committee. He has reviewed children's books for all ages (both national and international) for various trade and consumer newspapers and magazines, and occasionally can be heard on the radio. Chris regularly appears in Australian schools and at literary festivals. When working in America, he lectures at universities on children's books. Website: <http://www.chrischeng.com>.

When asked how I perceive internationalism in children's literature, I respond: What is internationalism? Is it publishing books from another country? Is it the setting of the book? Is there truly internationalism in children's books? Probably not. If there were, then every children's book published would be available in every country in every language.

And then I ask the question: Do we really want true internationalism in kids' publishing? Of course we do, especially if we are creating the works, and especially when we consider those books that might be the next literary phenomenon. Writing as an Australian children's author, I, like every other book creator, love the idea of my books being published internationally (to date, my picture book, *One Child*, stands alone as one published beyond Australia). The reality is, though, that in many cases my nonfiction trade books (which fit snugly into the Australian curriculum) were initially too Australian. Now, I also write historical fiction and picture books. Am I going to be more international?

In Australia, we read the historical diaries of royalty from other lands and period novels set in America about, among other issues, horrific times of slavery; it seems, however, that none of our titles in the *My Australian Story* series is available for children to devour outside our shores. My novel of a Chinese boy on the Australian gold fields is set at a time similar to the "rush" on the American gold fields. It also includes a character from the American gold rush and would make a wonderful comparison piece to an American story about the period. If teachers look for internationalism, I can supply them with appropriate reading materials.

Then there is the question of textual adaptations. Many books originating overseas contain unique flavors and colors and are distributed here (or maybe dumped) in their original formats and spellings, but are not republished for the Australian market. Some books that have originated in Australia have been republished with a different setting for this new international

market. For the author, this poses the problem of balancing the integrity of replacing language, characters, settings, and sometimes even the plot with the mercantile needs of the publisher. Integrity may be in conflict with the author's increased sales leading to possible tours, signings, and other prerequisites such as being wined and dined, being the focus of full-page editorials in every regional and national newspaper, or appearing on national morning television shows.

Oh. I forgot. This is children's literature! The author is not given a choice since he or she makes a moderate income from children's literature. But in the global world where children all around the world are exposed to foreign lifestyles and cultures, do we really need to alter the original text to make it more palatable for the new market? Certainly there are magical British novels of the wizarding kind that have made a worldwide impact with no change in the setting. But Deb Abela's feisty *Max Remy* books are now published in the U.S. (and elsewhere), although readers there will find them under the title *Spyforce*. The central character Max is now a New Yorker, and petrol has now become gas. The books were established in an Australian setting, but are now published with some significant changes. As a frequent visitor to the U.S. who adores dwelling in the book stores, I have seen a number of our Australian children's authors become significant sellers in American. To these eyes, it seems that more authors are making an international impact. Emily Rodda's *Deltora Quest*, Garth Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom* series (and the *Seven Towers*), Graeme Base's luscious picture books (to name just a few creators and their titles) have prominent places on the book shelves. In 2006, Markus Zusak's award-winning *The Book Thief* achieved a *New York Times* #1 listing and wonderful coverage on morning television shows. Many Margaret Wild and Mem Fox picture books are published internationally. Arthur Levine publishes a number of titles originating in Australia (with Australian settings), including those by Robert Ingpen.

In reality, each country wants the books that represent its cultures and places published first in that country and read first and foremost by its population whose literary needs fit the setting, characterization, and plot. This, then, leads further to the question: Are we meeting the needs of our own kids in our own countries? As I write, I am scratching my head and wondering if there are any books that are first published in Asian countries and are subsequently published or republished in Australia or the U.S. Surely our children, many of whom have relatives living in these countries, would benefit by this process. At the very least, it would assist the families in reinforcing their children's cultural heritage.

Promoting one's own is natural. In my former life as the children's specialist for a nationwide book chain, I was as guilty as anyone of promoting our national literary works. I wanted Australian children to read books by Australians. International books were reviewed and stocked, but the children's books by Australian authors and illustrators were heavily featured, applauded, and promoted in our bookstores. During the 2006-2007 school year, I promoted national names even more for our federal government. As a literacy ambassador for National Literacy and Numeracy Week, I compiled a list of 55 fantastic current Australian picture books. This was heavily advertised. Soon there will also be a fiction list, and the titles will

all feature Australian authors, illustrators, and publishers. Internationalism takes a back seat to authentic stories about Australia.

If there were true internationalism in children's publishing, maybe my books would never have been published; in Australia our market is different, where publishers are more apt to gamble on a new author or title. The economics of the international book industry could possibly prohibit taking chances with smaller profits. Then I would have to return to my former life as a teacher (I adored teaching) or a book seller (enjoyable) or who knows what I would be? I do know that being a children's author is absolutely the best fun in the world (barring publisher deadlines). And I enjoy visiting our schools and talking about writing stories that feature our country. I guess I have to admit that there still is not an international children's literature that meets the needs of all children, and I am extremely thankful that we do not have true international publishing with a canon of writers and illustrators.